

Statement Of Lieutenant Colonel James G. Zumwalt, Usmer (Ret)
Introduction Of The Ban Asbestos In America Act Of 2003
By Senator Patty Murray (D-Wa)
May 22, 2003

With the passing of my father three years ago from Mesothelioma, I learned a great deal about the tremendous suffering a single fiber of asbestos can impose upon a victim.

I have no hesitation, therefore, in declaring that today is indeed a great day. Yet, the true greatness of this day will not be fully appreciated today, nor tomorrow, nor ten years from now. No, it may take three decades or longer for the greatness of this day to fully be appreciated. Why? Because well before the halfway point of this century, there may well be a tremendous upsurge in asbestos-related cancers--a direct cause of the events of 9/11.

For it was on that day millions of asbestos fibers, contained within construction materials used to build the World Trade Center and Pentagon, were released into the atmosphere as those buildings collapsed. In the aftermath of that event, many of these dangerous fibers were then inhaled by unwary rescue workers, pedestrians and others walking about the cities of New York and Washington.

It will take many decades for these fibers to work their way into the lungs of their victims, at which point they may ultimately claim the life of their host. I say the greatness of today will not be fully appreciated until then because as asbestos-related cancers possibly become epidemic at that point in time, people will want to know what their government has done or is doing to protect them from further exposure to asbestos. Only then will concerned citizens focus on the fact that on May 22, 2003, legislation was introduced by Senator Patty Murray to ban the use of this material within the US forever.

Once this legislation is passed by Congress and the ban becomes effective, protection against exposure will, obviously, not be immediate. We need to be prepared for the fact it will take decades for the positive impact of this bill to take effect. Tragically, this ban should have been imposed decades earlier, already allowing us to benefit from its positive impact. Unfortunately, decades ago Patty Murray was far too young to be serving in the US Senate!

But where other legislators failed aggressively to attack the asbestos problem, Senator Murray and the cosponsors of this bill deserve credit for doing so. Not surprisingly, an EPA-commissioned report was released on May 19th calling for Congress to do exactly what Senator Murray has already taken the initiative to do--ban all uses of asbestos in the US. But her legislation also promotes research focusing on the possible detection and prevention of asbestos-related cancers. This will come as good news to a highly impacted group of incurable cancer victims and American heroes--US Navy veterans, like my late father, and shipworkers--who have suffered nearly one-third of all Mesothelioma fatalities.

This bill will have enormous impact: first, by its call for intensifying research on asbestos-related diseases--hopefully resulting in cures for victims in the first half of this century; second, by beginning the process of protecting generations of Americans, yet unborn, from asbestos exposure. One day, decades from now, Americans will be fully protected from the dangers of asbestos. Perhaps only then will the true greatness of today's actions by Senator Murray in introducing this legislation and by Senators Dayton, Baucus, Cantwell, Leahy, Boxer and Jeffords in cosponsoring it, be fully understood and appreciated.